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ABSTRACT

Intended for use by parents and teachers of preschool age children, this short booklet provides some guidelines to follow when introducing sex education to young children. It discusses issues such as where to begin, how to encourage the child to ask questions about sex, how to handle sex-related problems, child molestation, nudity and the family, parental need for privacy, and how to teach children not to use sexual terms when they are angry. In addition, the booklet provides a little glossary of sexual terms, lists a representative number of children's often-asked questions about genitals, pregnancy/birth, and the new baby, and provides simple and direct answers to those questions. (MP)

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Answering Young Children's Questions About Sex

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Introduction

Sex education should begin early at home and in the school. In a study made of 1400 children from 3 to 11 years of age, it was found that only 15% of the mothers and 10% of the fathers had ever discussed sex with them. In some cases, it is apparent that the parents should welcome help from qualified educators at the preschool level, the period when children first show a significant interest in sexual matters.

Some people feel that there is too much interest and attention paid to sex education today and that it is not needed – especially in the schools. Yet the statistics show that sexual ignorance is a factor in many of our social problems today. Half of today's teenagers are sexually active before the age of 20. A study made in 1976 shows that two-thirds of the venereal disease occurs in young people under 24 – and the figure has escalated in 1982.

Of those teenage girls who engage in intercourse before finishing high school, 3 in 10 become pregnant. This means more abortions, more welfare, more child abuse and more single-parent homes – as well as more school dropouts and the consequent increase in unemployable citizens. Now that we have established the undeniable need for sex education, we will discuss how it should be handled in the preschool years, by parents and teachers.

SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S.) pioneers in sex education states that if a young child's curiosity about sex is satisfied at home, he will be less interested in the advances of sex molesters and will fend them off and report them to his parents.

Many preschools have made a step in the right direction by having common lavatories for boys and girls to acquaint children with sex differences and elicit questions.

Many authorities feel it is more desirable to learn about genital differences from comparison with and observation of other

children, because observing adults is seen as harmful to young children, who often feel inferior or threatened in comparison with adults.

Where To Begin:

When children begin to ask questions about sex, usually between the ages of three to five – sometimes earlier – and often later, here are a few simple guidelines to follow. Answering questions is an opportunity to give children information they can understand, since young children do not have the mental capacity to grasp formal sex education the way it is taught in the schools to older children.

1. First find out how much the child knows. If he asks, "Where do babies come from?", say "Where do you think they come from?"

2. Then correct any misinformation the child may have and give him a simple, honest answer.

3. Never avoid answering questions. The child will then feel that the subject is somehow "dirty" or not nice. Remember that the child is as sensitive to your attitude as to the things you say.

4. Never give evasive answers, such as "Wait till you grow up." Or "You wouldn't understand; you're too little."

5. Try to use correct terminology. We have included a little glossary in this book which gives the correct medical terms for body parts and functions. Do not use long, scientific terms when simpler ones are available.

6. Answer questions in a way that will tell the child just as much as he wants to know and can grasp at that time. Longer explanations will only confuse him.

7. Always be honest with the child. Do not deliberately give him false information, such as "The doctor brings babies in his

black bag". Or "The mother carries the baby next to her heart." Parents should be no more embarrassed in giving correct explanations about sexual matters than in explaining about rain, clouds, thunder and other natural phenomena.

8. After you have given an accurate answer to a specific question, do not be upset if the child rejects it, or denies it. Children may stubbornly cling to their own beliefs. So if a little girl says, "I have a penis, too." Or if a little boy insists, "I do have a baby in my tummy." Or "I do have milk in my breasts," do not argue with them. Just state the facts simply and let the matter drop.

What To Do If The Child Does Not Ask Questions:

1. Try to encourage questions by reading stories or books.
2. Introduce pets and discuss their methods or reproduction as they occur.
3. Encourage dramatic play where children act out the roles of father and mother when "playing house". Pictures, nursery school experiences and allowing the older child to observe the baby nursing will bring up questions. Also, helping to change or bathe a new baby of the opposite sex, at home or at a neighbor or relative's home will stimulate the child's curiosity.

Some Questions Young Children Ask About Sex:

Naturally, in a book of this size, we cannot possibly list all the questions that inquisitive young children might ask. We have listed a number of often-asked and representative questions, with simple, direct answers, suitable to the age group we are addressing. Of course there are other questions you may be confronted with – and possibly other answers – (depending on what authorities you consult!) But these questions will give you a guideline to follow. If the answer covers more than one concept, they will be listed by number. It is difficult for a young child to hold two concepts in mind at once and evaluate the importance of each one.

Questions Children Ask About Genitals and Sex Organs:

Q. Why don't I have a penis?

A. Because girls don't have a penis. They have a vagina.

Q. Why do boys stand up to go to the toilet (when girls sit down to urinate)?

A. The penis is aimed down into the toilet, so boys stand up facing the toilet.

Q. Why do ladies have breasts?

A. So they can feed babies milk from them.

Q. Why don't I have any hair there?

A. Because you are still little. When you grow up, you will have hair.

Q. What is this belly button for?

A. That is your navel. That is where the baby used to get food from his mother before he came out of her uterus.

Q. Is this my penis?

A. No, it is your clitoris. Girls don't have a penis.

Questions Children Ask About Pregnancy/Birth:

Q. Why does that lady have a big tummy?

A. She is carrying a baby in her uterus.

Q. How does the baby get out of the mommy? (Out of the uterus?)

A. It comes out through a place called the vagina.

Q. Can I have a baby?

A. 1. Not yet; you aren't big enough
2. When you grow up, you can have a baby.

Q. Can boys have babies?

A. 1. No. Boys do not have a uterus for the baby to grow in.
2. When boys grow up, they can be daddies, but only girls are mommies.

Q. What is a uterus?

A. 1. It holds the baby and feeds it before it is big enough to come out.
2. The uterus is shaped like a pear and it is hollow inside.

Q. If the baby is inside the mommy, does it get hurt when she sits down?

A. No, the mother's uterus is a soft, warm place for the baby to grow.

Q. How did the baby get inside?

A. The baby was inside the mommy ever since it was a small egg.

Q. If the baby is an egg, won't it break?

A. No, the egg is the beginning of a real baby and it doesn't have an eggshell.

Questions Children Ask About The New Baby:

Q. What is the baby doing? (nursing.)

A. The baby is getting milk from mommy's breast.

Q. Will the new baby be a boy or girl?

A. Whatever it is, we will love it, won't we?

Q. Why does he/she have that little thing?

A. That's its penis (vagina). All boys (girls) have one.

Q. Why does the mommy go to the hospital to have a baby? Is she sick?

A. 1. No, she is not sick. The doctor helps the baby come out.
2. Some mommies have a baby at home.

Q. Can I watch you change (bathe) the baby?

A. Yes.* That's a good idea.

*This is a wholesome way for the older child to observe sex differences in baby boys and girls.

A Little Glossary Of Sexual Terms For Parents and Teachers

Acquaint yourselves with these definitions and practice using the words freely and often, so you will be at ease with them when using them with young children. Never use "street language," slang or "baby" words.

Anus – The lower opening of the intestinal tract.

Breast – Glandular tissue which contains milk ducts and nipples for nursing.

Cervix – The lower part of the uterus which opens into the vagina.

Clitoris – Sensitive and erectile organ, corresponding to the penis; part of the exterior genital area, designated as vulva.

Labia – Two pairs of "lips" which enclose female genitals.

Masturbation – Stimulation of the external genitals for sexual pleasure.

Navel (or umbilicus) – Site of the former attachment of the fetus to the mother's placenta.

Nipples – Elastic and erectile, react to stimuli to open up milk ducts, in women. Part of the male and female breast.

Ovaries – A pair of organs, on each side of the uterus, containing ova "eggs"; they also secrete sex hormones.

Pelvis – Lower part of body, bounded by pelvic (hip) bones.

Penis – The male organ of sexual intercourse.

Pubic – Refers to pubic bones which join the two halves of the pelvis (hip area) in front.

Pubic hair – Hair surrounding external genitals in males and females.

Pregnancy – The period when a fetus is carried in the uterus; approximately nine months.

Pregnant (adj.) – Carrying a child.

Scrotum – A sac of skin holding the testicles.

Rectum – Last few inches of the intestinal tract, just above the anus.

Semen – Fluid discharge by males during sexual intercourse which contains the sperm cells (spermatozoa).

Spermatozoa (or sperm) – The male germ cells which fertilize the female germ cells (ova).

Testicles (or testes) – The male sex glands which produce spermatozoa.

Urethra – Emits urine from bladder in both sexes.

Uterus (or womb) – A pear-shaped organ, deep in the pelvis, which contains, protects and nourishes the embryo (fetus) before birth.

Vagina – Female sex organ, extending from vulva to cervix, which receives the penis in intercourse.

Vulva – External female genital area, consisting of labia, clitoris and vaginal canal.

How to Handle Sex-Related Problems in the Family

Masturbation

Children of both sexes discover at a very early age that touching the penis or clitoris leads to very pleasant sensations. Masturbation is in itself not harmful and has beneficial effects for women in later life, since it acquaints them with their potential for orgasm.

What **is** harmful is parental disapproval – either by words, negative attitudes – or by use of physical restraints, warnings, scoldings, attaching feelings of guilt and fear to what is a nearly universal and perfectly natural act.

Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher, who left medicine to become President of Planned Parenthood, says:

> "Masturbation is a perfectly normal activity and it serves a purpose. It is an excellent way to reduce sexual tension. The old myth was that it caused mental deterioration . . . that is pure garbage. . ."

Dr. Joae Graham Selzer, M.D., a child psychiatrist, says:

> "Young children's interests in their bodies and the pleasure they experience in touching their genitals give rise to some masturbation which is entirely normal and pleasing to the child . . .
>
> The important thing to remember is that masturbation is pleasant, completely harmless, and the old wives' tales about its results are simply not true. Masturbation can only be harmful when parents react with anger and punishment, making the child feel s/he is bad or that the genitals are dirty. Parents' negative reaction to masturbation can result in a child's lowered self-esteem . . ."

When Children Of the Opposite Sex Want to "Marry" Mommy or Daddy:

It is common for young children of both sexes, between the ages of four and six to approach a parent and say, "Mommy (daddy), I want to marry you."

This is often flattering to the parent and he may attempt to play along with the idea, encouraging the child in his unreal expectations. But the parent should be honest and realistic and discourage the idea that a child can marry a parent; and help the child label what he is feeling.

A mother should reply, "No, I'm glad you love me, Billy and I love you. But daddy is my husband and I love him, too."

A father should not act seductive and say, "Yes, honey, you can be my wife. You are daddy's favorite girl." Instead, he should firmly and truthfully state, "No, I'm glad you love me, and I love you, but mommy is my wife and I love her, too."

Always, in discussing sex, love and marriage, bring out the warmth and caring part of family relations. i.e.: The mother and father have a baby because they love each other. And they will love the baby. They are a family and they all care for one another.

Child Molestation: How to Warn Children About Its Possibility

There is a fine distinction between frightening children about all the aspects of this deviate behavior – and keeping children ignorant of sexual matters, which authorities feel makes him more vulnerable to sexual exploitation of all kinds – molestation, pornography using children and incest.

One of the problems is that when we warn small children never to go anyplace with strangers or to let strangers fondle them, we are omitting an important fact. That is that much molesting is done by persons **known to the child** – uncles, fathers, neighbors, baby-sitters, etc.

In a firm, non-threatening way, we should suggest that **nobody** is to touch the child's genitals. And that they should not accept the gifts or invitations of anybody without asking mommy or daddy first. This should clearly apply not only to strangers, but to intimates of both sexes.

Incest, too, can be prevented by sex education and information. Many children do not understand the extent of this violation of trust (by parents and siblings of **both** sexes) and because of fear and guilt, that it is somehow "their fault," they do not report this behavior for many years – if at all.

Nudity and the Family

Many authorities on child development, including Dr. Selzer, feel that although parents feel they are just being "natural" by walking around nude in front of their children, they may be acting out an unconscious wish to be exhibitionistic or seductive, teasing, or superior. And the child perceives this, even if the parent doesn't.

Seeing the larger and different genitals of parents makes the children feel inferior and should be avoided in general.

It is almost impossible for the young child not to observe either mother or father in the nude at some time – or on several occasions . . . for example, wandering into the bedroom or bathroom when parents are nude. In this case, the adult should express no emotion and calmly get dressed at his usual pace, and be prepared to answer the child's questions about why the parent's genitals differ from his or hers.

The Parental Need for Privacy

Parents and older adolescent siblings should assume the right to keep the bedroom door closed (or even locked) at night and to keep the bathroom door closed while bathing or using the toilet.

The child's rights should also be observed. Often young children want to be left alone while on the toilet. (Although they should never be allowed to lock the bathroom door.)

Gradually, by example, the parents can teach the fact that people do not dress, undress or walk about nude in public. They do not masturbate in public or handle their genitals. Also they learn that it is okay to be alone in the bathroom and keep the door closed if you wish. **And** that there are times when mommy and daddy want to be left alone in their bedroom.

Should Children Observe Sexual Intercourse?

In many crowded homes, in communes and in some circles, this is acceptable or unavoidable. But most authorities in the field of child psychiatry, child psychology and family therapy agree that to the young child the experience of observing or listening to adults engaged in sexual intercourse is both frightening and threatening. They see it as an aggressive act on the part of the father – against the mother – and they fear for her in terms of bodily harm. The sounds and moans they hear are confusing and may be related to pain – rather than pleasure.

It is quite suitable for parents to firmly keep children out of their bedroom; to close the door whenever they wish – and if that does not work, to lock it. They should understand that they have their own room (hopefully) – or at least their own bed – and that is where they belong. In this respect, Dr. Selzer says they need help in learning not to be afraid of being alone in their own territory at night.* Adolescents, too, have a right to keep younger siblings out of their bedrooms at night – and during the daytime, if they wish to be alone.

*The videotape, "ALTERNATIVES," has a section called "Mommy, I'm Scared" that is helpful in handling children's fears.

What to Do If A Child Uses Sexual Terms In Anger:

Children become familiar with street language at an early age and often use the terms "shit," "fuck," "prick" and "asshole" either in anger, or simply as a way of attracting attention with what they seem to know are taboo words.

If the child is just "trying out" the words, try not to over-react. Just say quietly, "Hey, we don't talk that way." Or better still, ignore the first trial use of the offensive words.

If you find that the child is angry at another child, try to get him to express his feelings, rather than calling names. Say, "Did you call Billy that word because you are angry at him?" If he says, "Yes," then say, "Why don't you tell Billy you are mad at him for what he did. Come over with me and tell him now."

You can also explain what the word really means and use the incident to help the child name his feelings. When a child is able to name and express feelings, this will often defuse violent or objectionable behavior.

The Author and Her Views:

Gladys Hansen, founder of the Tom Berns Foundation, a non-profit organization, working to improve preschool education, is a dedicated crusader.

Under the imprint of LITTLE CHILDREN PRODUCTIONS, she has produced a widely accepted book. "VIOLENCE IN THE SANDBOX" and a videotape, "ALTERNATIVES", which is helpful in teaching non-violent behavior and how to cope with children's fears.

Ms. Hansen believes that with better preschools and teachers and enlightened parents, children will grow up with a good adjustment to life and qualities that will prevent their becoming delinquents and dropouts at an early age.

If we eliminate the problems that prevent learning, we can prevent many of the ills that plague our society – illiteracy, unemployment, dependence on welfare, as well as crime and violence.

Our failure to feed and educate carries a heavy price tag. Everything important to the child's future begins with the mother in her pregnancy. If she can be given good nutrition, good health care and education in child care, her infant will receive a real head start. Not at age three – but at birth. (Community education centers that could provide these services are discussed in Ms. Hansen's book.)

Gladys Hansen says, "It makes good sense for the government, business and the private sector to fund these projects, because everybody suffers from the cost of crime, welfare and unemployment."

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